

Out to lunge

Warning — wild iron!





PAUL COCKBURN grabs whip and wheel to tame one freaky feral fourbie

John E. Davis looks at me in the kindly way that one employs with idiots.

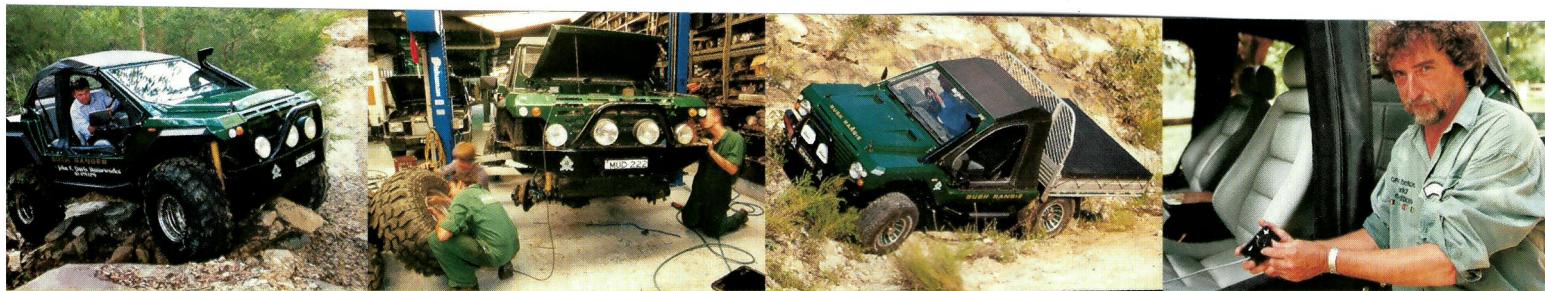
I have surely just qualified.

“For what purpose,” I have enquired in the manner of journalism, “do people purchase Bush Rangers?”

Giving me the benefit of doubt, he pauses a moment in the hope that the question might lead somewhere more challenging. It doesn't.

Softly shaking his head at my profound impairment, he looks up at the monstrous green result of cutting maybe one-third the weight out of a Range Rover while trebling its power. Then he leans forward, speaking slowly, to make sure that I get the full response on tape.

“For fun.”



From left: Meet John E Davis, King of Kooky Creations; it's name is mud – and not for nothing; brother ute – with the tilting tray; choose between plus or minus but remember: This line leads directly to The Lodge.

John E (for Excess, one imagines) Davis is very serious about fun. His eponymous motorworks sprawl over two hectares of Sydney's north-western bushland in a bewildering array of structures holding treats and treasures like a madman's lucky dip. This one packs a supercharged Dodge Ram and a manic desert racer, the next a 430 horsepower 968 CS Porsche for Targa Tasmania fun. That one's stuffed with American ponycars and over there the Japanese hot-rods (Nissan GTS and GTRs) await attention. But for flat-out, industrial-strength lunacy, Davis has yet to find anything funnier than a Range Rover. That notion, one way or another, has struck a few of us over the years.

But Davis took it seriously enough to create the largest Range Rover specialist workshop in the world to see just how much fun you can have with Range Rodding. And it turns out to be more than anyone except himself ever imagined.

To allow his creativity full rein, Davis' Annangrove dreamworks has the independence of complete in-house engineering ("You want how much motor?"), bodybuilding and just about every other car-crafting facility you could want: "Upholstery? Oh yeah. Didn't I show you that shed?"

And from this sprawl come some of the world's wildest off-roaders; Hummer/Rover hybrids, supercharged standard-bodied sleepers and a steady supply of Very Special Range Rovers for the Middle East market. Special to the tune of a 10-inch (250mm) stretch, exquisite interior fittings,

pearl paint and a 373kW all-alloy Chevrolet launcher to command the royal attention. Another car in development has the now-customary stretch complemented with an 8-inch (203mm) widening. Think about this. Maintaining panel curvature, creating front, rear and side windows, sorting out the

Hell, even looking at them hurts. This feral Fiorano is the daytime proving ground for customer developments and the after-hours playland for the bizarre and bastard creations that the staff whip up for their own amusement. Passion and brute power! Welcome to the Maranello of mud!

Whatever awe one is meant to feel at the brute's vertical aptitude, my reaction is simply helpless, hooting laughter. I believe this may be a terror response



dashboard and console. Oh, and bracing everything for the 800 horsepower alloy big-block specified. Hard going, all of it. But, if it works, the buyer wants 10 of 'em.

And work it will. The immaculate craftsmanship may well surprise from so rustic a forge but anvil-tough underpinnings are completely predictable. One look at the test-track tells you that. Carved into an adjoining 10 hectares of bushland are trails and climbs and crossings so horrible that you wouldn't attempt them on foot.

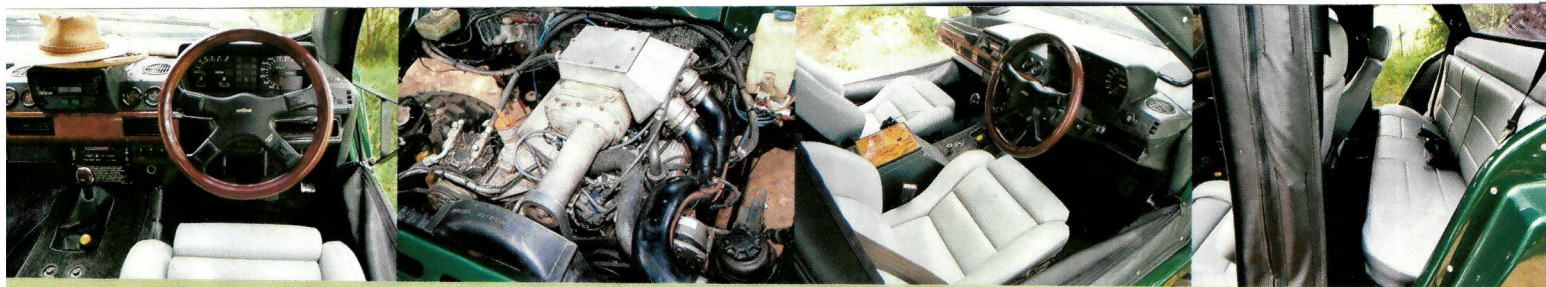
All of which brings us to John Davis Motorworks' current offering for the laughter-deprived. Conceived in England and developed by JDM in Australia, the Bush Ranger is just possibly the most outrageous employment of four-wheels you legally can buy in all the land. Twenty have already been built for a clientele that includes some of our most notable fun-hunters and it's a fair bet that no two are alike. Which is Part One of the enjoyment.

The similarities are easy to catalogue. Stripping, bracing and galvanising the undamaged frame

of a rolled Range Rover, JDM refurbishes the suspension and replaces the original townhouse with a fully-upholstered roll-frame and a fibreglass body which, to ensure rattle-free rigidity, has but one opening panel – the bonnet. With a payload now some 700kg lighter than before, even the rebuilt, standard 3.5 litre V8 belts proceedings along with uncommon vigour. And dignity: the Rover's luxodashboard and amenities are retained, along with sport seating, carpet, power-steering and hints of timber. This will cost you a mere \$49,850 on road with a 12/20,000 promise and that's Part Two.

Part Three, however, is the most fun: That's when you start trolling through the option list to make your Bush Ranger really yours. Five-seater or ute? Your choice. Petrol engines up to 5.8 litres, turbo-diesels to 6.5? Sign here. Transmissions? Anything but Tiptronic. Lashings of leather? Pick your cow. Super-duty everything? Open your wallet, repeat after me "Help yourself."

However you take your Bush Ranger, bomb-proofing comes free. Davis has seen to that. He's learnt how, by flipping one end-for-end at Stockton Beach on a film shoot, ripping the front corner off another on a sidelong 35m jump, driving dashboard-deep through water-crossings, spinning all four tyres clean off the rims in a mud-hole and driving right over three Lada Nivas "because that's what Lada Nivas are for." The brochure leads with a photo of a Bush Ranger at hat-height in the air (Davis driving, natch) and a caption which begins, "After



From Left: Forests were felled for the Bushie's trim – steering wheel, dash, gearknob and console all use wood; under the bonnet the supercharger dominates; like Ned Kelly, the Bush Ranger has a hide ... upholstery both front and rear seats.

four years R&D..." Which further brings us to Davis' very own personal interpretation of bush bliss – a pure Tonka terrifier, half-tamed, hellacious ... and very, very funny. Propped up on half-a-yard of suspension travel with 38.5 inch (metre-high) tyres, the brute looks absolutely the business. Fire it up and the NASCAR soundtrack booming through an exhaust as big and toxic as the Bondi outfall reinforces the impression. Open the bonnet and no doubt remains.

Being unfamiliar with the concept of moderation, Davis has fitted a fuel-injected, Haltech computerised 4.6 stroker which, given the weight reduction, you may think adequate. But he doesn't. Hence the B&M supercharger mounted on top to give 400bhp on 10lb boost and instant, ground-shaking, chassis-rocking response.

If you factor locking the front, rear and central diffs with overhangs that give near-vertical take-off angles, you get climbing ability that is simply beyond belief. Drive up a steepening cliff face and you'll easily better 50°. Keep going and the front wheels will lift off. It is infinitely beyond my curiosity to experience what happens with any further throttle. Whatever awe one is meant to feel at the brute's vertical aptitude, my reaction is simply helpless, hooting laughter. I believe this may be a terror response.

Take advantage of the card-table ground clearance and it's easy to believe Davis when he says "I haven't found a 4WD anywhere – *anywhere* – including Hummers, that'll go where this will go." My own impression is simpler: This is a car for those who cannot achieve fear by

normal means.

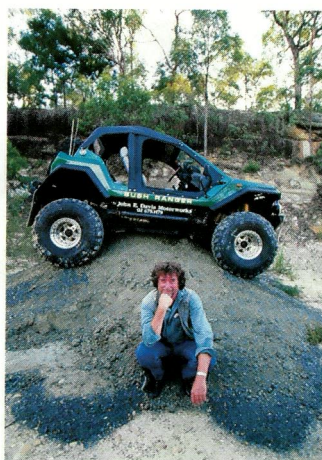
"That slot on the dashboard," Davis says helpfully as we prepare to launch his toy on innocent society, "is where you put your CDs in". The man's mad. Whatever the appropriate soundtrack ... and only Wagner springs to mind ... I'm damned if I need the distraction. Within the first 100m I know it isn't an option, anyway. As speed rises in a crashing aural wave, wind rages through the cockpit and pressure-scours every orifice. Photographer Kent likens the effect to enjoying a pull-through with a Christmas tree and I can't improve on that. The acceleration is phenomenal – not for whatever numbers it may produce, but for the sheer and wildly improbable sensations that accompany it. Floor the throttle and it's like riding down on the top floor of a building being blast-demolished. And about as tranquil.

Bucking and tugging at the helm, the mad careening bull of a car lunges forward, absorbing the spur of each gearchange with an enraged bellow as it claws the road in. Somewhere on the console, in peripheral vision, dances the mysterious '+' and '-' control on the end of a cable that winds lethally toward the boiler room. Davis' explanation of its purpose escapes me in the maelstrom, but I feel no need to turn it up at this moment. And I never will.

The four huge wheels now take on a life of their own, becoming a self-contained SuspendoWorld on which the rest of the apparatus is perched like a loose load, nimble as the Hindenburg. Take the first corner at speed and the

phenomenon of gyroscopic effect progresses from theory to terrifying fact in one eye-widening nanosecond. Savour the moment. You'll never do it again.

In truth, these wheels, controversial even at JDM, tell more about John Davis' own priorities than they do about the Bush Ranger's possibilities. Uncompromising in their off-road orientation, they dominate the character of his car every bit as much as the supercharged wail of the motor. You could – and I would – opt for more conventional hoops ... but there



Unique biped, mad four-wheel drive. Cockburn was last seen handing cash to the owner...

can be no denying the impact these whoppers have either on the landscape or the sensibilities of anyone who sees the package. We never did run Correvit times on the monster but, for what it's worth, I can bear witness to its ability to empty the village pub in under 10 seconds or Hoover out a primary school in 7.2 flat. And, in such company, the presence of something that screams as much fun as a topless brewery tour or a week at

WonderWorld makes any talk of reality a complete waste of wind. Knobber Jackson swears blind that no man alive could bog such a thing – which is probably not true but God Himself couldn't get it again out if you did – and my young son looks at the standard Range Rover speedometer with disdain.

"It'll beat 180km/h, won't it dad?"

"Quite possibly, son, but I'd have jumped out at 140."

So despite such irrepressible enthusiasm, can The Car That ImaX Built really be taken seriously? The downsides are obvious: Zip-up accommodation, no boot space and clamber-aboard access all come standard. Davis promises that a gullwing hardtop, fold-down tote-tray and a ladder are all being developed to address such issues but, follow that logic to its conclusion and you'd buy a Prado for the money. No, keeping it simple is the only way to make sense of the Bush Ranger. Lightened and heightened, the chassis' already prodigious off-road ability will now take it way beyond commonsense and the inherited ride quality will make the journey a pleasure. The unstressed mechanicals and corrosion-resistant package should last approximately forever and the well-waterproofed, high quality, high-visibility canopy attaches in stages to suit the coverage requirements of anyone from Naomi to Noah. Sensible? Enough for me to easily see one of these puppies in my future.

"But why," asks photographer Kent, "would you need such a thing?" I look at him in the kindly way that one employs with idiots. 